

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76885-6 - Women and States: Norms and Hierarchies in International Society

Ann E. Towns

Excerpt

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# 1 Introduction

I can only answer the question “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”

*Alasdair MacIntyre*<sup>1</sup>

This book has two aims, one empirical and the other theoretical. The empirical aspiration is to account for a development that has received insufficient attention within the field of international relations: the worldwide emergence of state behaviors that expressly target women. The theoretical ambition is to propose a rethinking of the operation of norms in international society. Norms do not simply homogenize states, as is conventionally argued – norms rank and set up relations of hierarchy among states as well. In short, to understand and explain the spread of certain state practices towards women, this book points to the importance of the status of women as a standard of rank in international society.

## The spread of state institutions on women

The worldwide changes in the relation between women and the state are nothing short of revolutionary. A century ago, all polities that were organized as states rested on the exclusion of women from their formal institutions. With the exception of an occasional queen as head of state, women were shut out of the public roles of state representative, official or civil servant. In the emerging democracies of Europe, women became expressly prohibited from voting and in some cases even from joining political parties or attending political rallies. German political activist Clara Zetkin complained in 1895 that “prohibition after prohibition of women’s assemblies takes place, the expulsion of women from public meetings are [*sic*] a daily occurrence and penalties for women for

<sup>1</sup> MacIntyre 1984: 216.

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violating the Law for the Formation of Associations inundate the courts.”<sup>2</sup> Women had no place in the formal affairs of state in the nineteenth century.

Today’s situation is thoroughly different. Virtually every state has incorporated women in some manner, whether as voters, public officials or political representatives. The incorporation of women into state institutions around the world has taken place in sets of changes that developed neither simultaneously nor jointly. Women’s suffrage emerged in the late nineteenth century and has now become virtually universal, institutionalized in all but a few states. Suffrage legislation emerged globally in four waves, following an interesting clustered path. The female vote was first conceded among states on the outskirts of what was then “civilized society” – New Zealand (1893), Australia (1902), Finland (1906), and Norway (1907) – to eventually include most of the remaining European and North American states by the end of the two World Wars. An overlapping though quicker second wave of transformations took place in the emerging socialist states of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which institutionalized women’s suffrage primarily between 1918 and 1924. Latin America passed suffrage laws in a third wave, mainly between the late 1930s and mid-1950s. Finally, whereas suffrage was extended to women in certain colonized areas, formal political roles were generally denied women under European colonial rule. Suffrage instead emerged in most of Africa and Asia when national independence was won, between 1945, in Indonesia, and 1975, when Portuguese colonies such as Angola and Mozambique finally became independent.

Over 90 percent of contemporary states have furthermore created a public bureau to handle women’s issues, what is called in United Nations parlance a national women’s machinery (NWM). These bureaus are charged with addressing the situation of women in public policy and thus bring women’s issues (and women) into the formalized public policy planning and implementation processes. Whereas the more specific mandates of national machineries vary, they all share a directive of institutionalizing the situation of women into the formal political, fiscal or bureaucratic processes of the state.

Unlike suffrage, which developed in temporally distinct waves, these national policy machineries came into being rather swiftly. It took less

<sup>2</sup> Zetkin 1895: 61.

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than two decades for these bureaus to become created in two thirds of the world's states. And unlike suffrage, their geographical trajectory was not clustered, emerging seemingly randomly across the world beginning with the USA (1961), Australia (1963), Argentina (1965), Malaysia (1965), West Germany (1965) and Nepal (1967). One set of states was notably absent in embracing this development, however: not one of the communist states created a national women's machinery. It would take the collapse of communism as a form of state before post-communist states came to create NWMs.

We are now in the midst of another transformation in the relations between women and the state that may become global in scope: the incorporation of women into national legislatures through some form of quota legislation. Legislature sex quotas generally demand that a certain portion of candidates for national legislatures be slotted for women, ranging from 20 percent to 50 percent. They may also involve the less common action of reserving legislative seats specifically for women. Not only do most states now allow women to serve in legislative assemblies, in other words, but positive action is institutionalized to increase the number of female legislators.

Nearly fifty states have adopted some form of quota legislation to increase the level of women in the national legislature since 1991. And this number is likely to increase, since there are presently campaigns in another fifty some states to pass such laws. Interestingly, the geographical path of these quota measures could hardly be more different than those of suffrage and national women's machinery. The present surge of national quota laws developed primarily out of Latin America in the 1990s, where the great majority of countries passed such laws during the past decade. African and Asian states are now following suit, including several Islamic states, such as Djibouti (2002), Pakistan (2002), Morocco (2002), Indonesia (2003) and Jordan (2003). The constitutional provisions for 25 percent women in the new national legislature of Afghanistan (2004) and the provisional constitution of Iraq (2004) have received a great deal of attention. Standing out against this trend, the use of quotas in Western Europe and North America is exceedingly rare and, by the end of 2009, includes only Belgium (1994), France (2000) and Spain (2007).

Considering the worldwide scope of adoption of these three measures, it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the relations between women and the state have changed in astonishing ways during the past

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century. Virtually all states have institutionalized female voting and now address the situation of women – however variably – through a national women’s machinery. Legislation to augment the number of women in national legislature is increasingly being adopted around the world. In view of the evenness of these worldwide state transformations, they are clearly touched by international processes.

Despite their international character, these profound changes have received remarkably sparse attention by international relations (IR) scholars. There is, to be sure, a small and important body of work that has done so, and this scholarship will be addressed throughout the book. But the issue has certainly not given rise to anything akin to a debate in the discipline. From this, we can by and large conclude that the formal designation of half of the world’s population as political agents has not yet been included in the “small number of big and important things” with which IR has been so preoccupied.<sup>3</sup> The worldwide emergence of female suffrage, national machinery for women and sex quota laws remain among the many subjects on women, gender and international politics that are still fundamentally under-explored within the field of IR.

The aim of this book is to help fill this gap by providing an account of the worldwide emergence of women’s suffrage, national machinery for women and sex quota laws. However, as will become apparent throughout this book and as I shall illustrate briefly below, it is far from evident what these practices are all about, since the meaning of each practice is far from given. One of the most fundamental questions to ask is thus how to characterize and understand these developments. That is indeed my first question: *What* is going on here? In other words, what *are* these transformations? As we shall see below and throughout this book, the answer to this question is not straightforward and demands theoretical attention. Once these developments are characterized, a subsequent set of closely related questions can be posed, centering on *how* and *why* these transformations were brought about. How can we account for these changes, from an international relations perspective?

### More similar states in a homogenized international society?

Even though the discipline of IR has not yet given much attention to the spread of women’s suffrage, women’s policy bureaus or sex quotas, the

<sup>3</sup> Waltz 1986: 329.

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analytical tools of the field can help to characterize the transformations and provide answers to how and why the relations between women and the state have become restructured. The rich tradition of constructivism is particularly well positioned to do so. If we begin with the first and fundamental analytical question of how to characterize such developments, scholars who emphasize the role of norms and constitutive world culture scripts would contend that these developments are indications that the actors of international society are becoming increasingly similar. Centuries ago, the world was made up of a host of different kinds of polities, with heterogeneous forms of political organization around the globe. During the past one hundred years in particular, these scholars claim, we have witnessed the regulation and homogenization of political life worldwide, as the state has become the chief mode of political organization.

Along with the state, the individual citizen has also come into being globally, if still unevenly, with the help of international norms. Suffrage, state bureaus and quota measures would probably be characterized as instances not only of the victory of the state as the predominant polity but also of the individualization of humanity. Sexual differentiation and the exclusion of one sex from formal state affairs may be giving way to the treatment of men and women alike as individual citizens. Constructivists would likely assert that states are becoming more and more similar in their behavior towards increasingly de-gendered human beings who are more equally empowered politically.

The spread of these institutions is often characterized not just as homogenization but as Westernization. In many contemporary contexts around the world, there are persistent presumptions that the empowerment of women is a particularly Western or European phenomenon with roots in the Enlightenment. Such views have even made it into the core of political science. For instance, Inglehart and Norris (2003) call gender equality the source of “the true clash of civilizations.” Like many others, they attribute the empowerment of women unequivocally to Western values and traditions. Susan Okin’s rhetorical question and essay title, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?*,<sup>4</sup> likewise points to the anxiety that many in Europe and North America feel about the presumed conflict between non-European politico-cultural traditions and sexual equality. Western, liberal states are the

<sup>4</sup> Okin 1999.

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best guarantors of female empowerment and dignity in this view. Other states are not.

These claims resonate in the field of international relations. As we shall see in Chapter 2, constructivists generally approach the homogeneous nature of international society as having its roots in the norms, values and ideas of the European Enlightenment. The international spread of suffrage, women's policy bureaus and sex quotas may appear to be a particularly clear case of Westernization, an indication that modern and liberal values and ideas on women have spread from the West across the world.

This portrayal, of the worldwide standardization and homogenization, is certainly plausible. There is a homogenizing dimension of norms. A measure such as women's suffrage is undoubtedly approached and discussed as the same kind of practice around the world, in the more narrow sense of involving women casting votes for political candidates. There is wide agreement that women should be allowed to vote to the same extent as men. In this sense, norms do make states more similar to one another. And yet there are crucial empirical challenges that should make us rethink the claims about international norms and state similarity, as we shall see below.

### **Women as a standard of rank in a hierarchical international society**

The main empirical challenges presented in this book concern the understanding and meaning of suffrage, national machinery for women and sex quotas across the world. If, as constructivists must, one takes inter-subjective meaning seriously, one cannot set apart what state institutions *are* from the meanings through which they are constituted and reproduced. And if the worldwide emergence of these state institutions is really about homogenization, then the understandings of what these institutions are and do should point to a world of more similar states.

However, as this book will show, the rationales and motivations for these practices – the understandings of why such behavior is appropriate for a particular state – have consistently rested on identifying certain kinds of states as inferior to others. State behavior towards women has often provided an opportunity not only to differentiate among states but also to evaluate and rank states in a hierarchical manner. Let me

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take a moment to provide a few illustrations to make this point more clear.

In 1902, by the end of the Philippine–American War, Philippine patriot and feminist Clemencia López took her anti-imperialist advocacy to Boston. One of the groups she addressed was the New England Woman Suffrage Association. López took the opportunity to speak about the situation of women in the Philippines, making the following statement:

I am glad of this opportunity to address you, so that you who are kind enough to give me your courteous attention may have a better idea, and may form a different and more favorable opinion of the Filipinos, than the conception which the generality of the American people have formed, believing us to be savages without education or morals.

I believe that we are both striving for much the same object – you for the right to take part in national life; we for the right to have a national life to take part in. And I am sure that, if we understood each other better, the differences which now exist between your country and mine would soon disappear.

You will no doubt be surprised and pleased to learn that ... mentally, socially, and in almost all the relations of life, our women are regarded as the equals of our men. You will also be surprised to know that this equality of women in the Philippines is not a new thing. It was not introduced from Europe ... Long prior to the Spanish occupation, the people were already civilized, and this respect for and equality of women existed.<sup>5</sup>

López was clearly responding to what she considered a misrepresentation of the situation of women in the Philippines, that Filipinos were “savages without education or morals” who knew nothing of equality between men and women. Her challenge invoked a then predominant hierarchical classification scheme, namely that the world consisted of peoples and polities along a continuum from savagery to civilization. Americans had misunderstood the position of the Philippines in that hierarchy, she objected. Filipinos were civilized long before the Europeans arrived, and the equal standing of women and men was evidence of this.

López’s statement is suggestive of the unequal status between what were then considered “civilized” and “barbarous” societies. Like many of her contemporaries, she discussed the situation of women in terms of this hierarchy. López used the situation of women as a standard of

<sup>5</sup> López 1902.

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assessment, a criterion by means of which she could define and evaluate the Philippines and place it in the hierarchical order between civilization and barbarism.

López is far from alone in using the situation of women to assess and rank states. Amina Al Saied, the Egyptian representative in the African-Asian Solidarity Organization and secretary-general of the Arab Women's Union, was an important transnational activist for the political empowerment of women in Africa and Asia in the mid to late twentieth century. In 1958, she explained that "whenever I visit a foreign country for the first time ... I compare between the status of women in it and the status of our women and then I work from this to extract ... the place of the modern Egyptian woman in the pageant of world civilization." Compared to "advanced" societies such as France, the USA and Britain, she argued, Egypt was still "at the bottom of the ladder." However, matched up to most Asian and African women, Egyptian women were the "pinnacle of culture and advancement."<sup>6</sup>

In both of these examples, we can see a comparative and even competitive dynamic around the situation of women. States not engaged in proper behavior are identified as different and inferior – as barbarous, in the language of López and Al Saied. Importantly, as this book will show, even when states do engage in what is presumably the same behavior – enabling women's suffrage, for instance – the rationales and explanations for the appropriateness of this behavior still rank-order states. This simultaneous ranking and differentiating dynamic is not compatible with the portrayal of norms only as a homogenizing force.

A more adequate characterization of the worldwide spread of women's suffrage, policy bureaus and quota laws needs to take into account both the homogenizing and the stratifying dimensions of norms. What we need to understand and explain about the worldwide spread of state institutions is not simply increased similarity but rather what I claim to be an interconnected dynamic of simultaneous homogenization and stratification. This book takes to heart Roland Robertson's contention that the true challenge to the study of globalization is "spelling out the ways in which homogenizing and heterogenizing tendencies are mutually implicative."<sup>7</sup> To study norms is also to study social hierarchies.

<sup>6</sup> As cited in Bier 2004: 104.    <sup>7</sup> Robertson 1995: 27.



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This book will show that an abstract and rather general norm about state practices towards women has been effective in international society at least since the early nineteenth century. In the abstract, the norm can be captured as “Better states exhibit appropriate practices towards women.” State practices towards women have been and continue to be important standards of rank across the world. But what sorts of practices are deemed appropriate and, in turn, which states appear as superior to others are matters of perspective and subject to debate. In 1998, for instance, a young Afghan woman was given one hundred lashes at the Kabul Sports Stadium, for an alleged act of adultery. Her persecutor is reported to have cried out: “Thanks to the Taliban, the army of God, that we can protect the honor of our people ... thanks to God that we are followers of God and not the West,” before the 30,000 spectators.<sup>8</sup> Like many others, Taliban clerics and rulers saw a close link between the empowerment of women and the West. The official and often violent subordination of women to men became one set of state measures held to differentiate Taliban Afghanistan from the despised West.

However, the prevalent idea that equality between women and men is an exclusively European invention or a particularly Western and liberal set of values has been far from unchallenged around the world. Indeed, this idea has been disputed ever since it developed. As an illustration of such a challenge, let us return for a moment to the address by Clemencia López before the New England Suffrage Association in 1902. Her claim could not be clearer: “Equality of women in the Philippines is not a new thing. It was not introduced from Europe.” This book will show that like López, many activists, scholars, state representatives and other public officials have grappled with and then rejected the idea that the political empowerment of women is a practice stemming from Europe or North America. They have instead traced the appropriateness of the institutions that are the subject of this book to pre-colonial and non-Western politics and values. This book will also show that many others have objected that these practices are about communism rather than liberal, Western statehood. With such disagreements over the sources and rationales for suffrage, women’s policy machinery and quotas, it is questionable whether the political empowerment of women is attributable only or primarily to the liberal West.

<sup>8</sup> Gentile 1999.

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## Norms, social hierarchies and change

Much of this book is concerned with the primary analytical question of how to characterize and understand the worldwide emergence of women's suffrage, national machinery for women and quota laws. Laying out the conceptual link between norms and social hierarchies is a major theoretical task of Chapter 3. Demonstrating, examining and dissecting the simultaneous stratifying and homogenizing nature of the international norms governing these state practices take up a large portion of the subsequent empirical chapters. However, the book also attempts to help to explain the origin and process of these worldwide changes. This moves us to the second aim identified above, addressing why and how these transformations came about.

Explaining how and why norms change (and homogeneity is brought about) is the primary task that much constructivist scholarship has set out for itself. Chapter 2 of this book shows that constructivist explanations vary more than the characterizations of international society – some explanations are structural and emphasize the importance of contradictions in world culture as a source of homogenizing change, whereas others are agent-oriented and trace these transformations to the work of social movements. What the explanations nonetheless share is an assumption that the worldwide adoption of new state practices is unrelated to states' “‘class’ position[s] in the system.”<sup>9</sup> Social relations of hierarchy among states are assumed not to be part of the explanation for how and why new state behaviors emerge and spread. This book fundamentally challenges that assumption.

In short, I make three claims about the role international social hierarchies have in prompting change in state practices worldwide, relating to the *origin* and *process* of new behavior among states. The first claim is that social stratification helps to account for the origin in international society of new worldwide state behavior. New policies may originate with states that abide by norms and are high in rank, in order to maintain that standing. Whether admired or envied, their rank – being seen as superior to other states in some regard – then helps to prompt other states to follow suit.

But change does not exclusively emerge out of the so-called core of international society. States that are low in rank may also become the

<sup>9</sup> Meyer 1980: 115.